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ABSTRACT

Drawing its materials from any genre, a Readers Theater differs from the usual theatrical presentation in that its action takes place in the reader's mind and is then projected to the audience. The one requirement for "production" is the reader or a group of readers--a stage is unnecessary. On a simple level, it emphasizes placement of readers, use of script, and variations of foci--on-stage, off-stage, or audience focus. A more advanced group can elaborate on the use of voice and body movement, but should still work for simplicity and clarity. (MF)

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A Readers Theatre in Your Classroom

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Echo for three voices.

Readers Theatre
Readers Theatre
Readers Theatre

Voice one. **What is it? . . .**
All voices. **Presenting with our voices . . .**
Voice two. **A mental picture . . .**
All voices. **To occur in your mind.**

The voices tell us that Readers Theatre (RT) differs from the usual theatre presentation where action takes place on the stage as characters "act out" a situation. In RT the action takes place in the reader's mind. He sees the action as he reads and projects it to his audience. And so you need no stage, no stage effects, no actors. You need a few students who like to read.

One of the techniques that gives RT its distinctive style has to do with the way you arrange the readers. I remember a group of six students doing scenes from Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. Six chairs were arranged in a line in front of the room, facing the blackboard. The students entered and sat. One rose and stepped around in front of her chair; and when she had finished, she returned to her seat, her back to the audience. There was a pause and the next spectre rose, faced his audience and recalled his time on earth. The image they provoked with this technique was, of course, the dead rising from their graves and then returning to them. It was simple; and it worked.

Arrange your chairs in a pattern—one row, or two or more —grouping characters or not as you wish. Just be sure that all the readers can be seen.

Another technique—focus—answers the question that the wrigglers and gigglers may be asking—"Where do I look?" On-stage focus, off-stage focus and audience focus clarify the boundaries of attention.

The different effects of on-stage and off-stage focus have to be experienced. Choose a meaty drama—*Death of a Salesman, The Glass Menagerie,* etc. Select a scene of strong conflict and ask a couple of students to read it.

First, seat them in front of the room. You read the last few lines of the preceding scene. Then, as their scene begins, ask them to rise, step forward and turn about a quarter turn to one another. (Specify a quarter turn or else they will face one another completely and it will be difficult for the people on the

sides of the room to see.) Ask them to talk directly to one another when they are able to lift their eyes from the scripts. This is on-stage focus, the focus of conventional theatre forms.

In Readers Theatre, off-stage focus is used more often than on-stage focus. You have probably seen RT productions or else pictures of actors seated on stools, looking straight out over the heads of the audience, playing the scenes as if they were talking to one another but not looking at one another at all. This is off-stage focus.

If there were ten readers stretched across the front of your room and numbers one and ten had a scene together, their eye lines would cross in space in about the middle of the room. Readers five and six would have almost parallel eye lines. If your readers have trouble focusing on a given spot (and it does feel strange at first), tape the names of the characters opposite them on the back wall, just above the heads of the audience.

Now, ask your students to read the same scene using off-stage focus. Then, again, do part of the scene one way and then the other so that the class can begin to compare the emotional impact of each.

The third type of focus is audience focus—the reader speaks directly to his audience. If you were doing a reading of *Huckleberry Finn,* for example, Huck would use audience focus. This would be true of the narrator of any story. The narrator speaks to his audience. Huck would speak to us when narrating, and would use on or off-stage focus in scenes with others.

When you teach your students to use focus, you give them a way to harness their energy. They know that in addition to trying to visualize the scene, they have to direct the images to another character, to an imagined face on the back wall, to an audience. There is little energy left for self-consciousness and nervousness if they are really doing that.

The goal is communication. When they see the difference between an unfocused reading and a focused reading, you will not have to say another word.

Another technique—one that usually makes students very happy —involves the way the script is used. The readers carry the script in their hands. It is typed with enough spaces between lines to see them clearly, and inserted into a loose-leaf binder so that the pages can be turned easily. In professional productions, the readers memorize their parts. The use of the script is a conceit—it is a way to distance the audience from the emotional involvement of an "acted" performance. There can be no doubt that the people before you are readers. They suggest the action to you, and enlist your imagination to create the scenes in your mind.

Your students will learn their scripts as well as they can so that they are not completely dependent upon them. Those who memorize easily will probably do so. Obviously, the less they need the script the more energy is available for concentration on the images as they recount them.

These few techniques can provide a beginning for a Readers Theatre. But for those who want to go further and include some work in speech and movement, I am going to suggest a few others. Let us assume that a reader understands the literature. How does he proceed to work on the script to improve the quality of the oral communication? Let me suggest a procedure.

First he reads the script aloud several times. He does not impose characteristics onto the words but rather lets the words suggest images to play in his mind as if he were creating a film. Then he begins to use his voice as if it were an accompaniment to the film. And through variations in volume, pitch, rate and pause, he suggests the personality of each character he plays.

If he is a good observer a lot of this will happen naturally. But inspiration is often fleeting and if he wants to be able to recreate his first intuitive reading, he must work at the script consciously.

In a classroom presentation of excerpts from *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas, one boy played three parts: the Reverend Eli Jenkins, Mog Edwards and Butcher Beynon. Basing his decisions on character analysis, he came up with a different pattern of volume, pitch, rate and pause for each one.

The Reverend was pictured as an elderly, thoughtful, gentle man who moved slowly through the world, savoring its wonder. Mog Edwards was interpreted as a shy, tight, spirit—one that would soar but could not. Butcher Beynon was seen as a roistering braggart with a lively imagination. And this is how he heard them:

Character	*Volume*	*Pitch*	*Rate*	*Pause*
Reverend Jenkins	soft to medium	low to medium	slow to medium	often
Mr. Mog Edwards	soft to medium	medium to high	medium to fast	sometimes
Butcher Beynon	soft to loud	low to high	slow to fast	rarely

As he developed these ideas, the boy marked his script so that when he read to the class he would be reminded of some of these changes.

Simple, understated body movement also reveals character. In RT, movement is often a suggestion of an action, not a realistic one. In choosing a specific movement, the attempt is to capture the abstract line of an experience rather than its detailed representation. Let me clarify this.

I recently staged John Lewis Carlino's collage for voices, *The Brick and the Rose*. The play is about a boy who gets hooked on drugs and dies of an overdose of heroin. It is written to be done in RT style and I recommend it highly for use now.

There is a fight scene in the play. We used offstage focus. The punches thrown were aimed in exactly the same direction as the eye focus — toward the back wall. The boy who punched did not swing wildly as he might have done if the scene were staged realistically, but rather suggested a short punch to a midsection as if the other boy were in front of him. The boy taking the punch, contracted his body slightly to receive it. The impact of these suggested movements were strong even with a book in one hand.

Another highly charged action that has to be cooled for RT is a scene like the suicide in *Up the Down Staircase*. In a classroom presentation, a student found an answer. She carefully lifted an imaginary window, moved through it, and slowly sat down and lowered her head.

Body movement then is a clear suggestion of an action, often done in slow motion for greater impact. At all other times the student remains relaxed and still, knowing that every movement communicates meaning and that the slightest tic can distract from the lines and actions of others. The reader's goal is to transfer his understanding of the author to his audience. He works for simplicity and clarity, suggesting character through voice and minimal movement.

This brief outline of the art form is a beginning. As you create your RT, let some experts help you. You will find excellent exercises in pantomime and concentration in Viola Spolin's book, *Improvisation For the Theater*, and in Nellie McCaslin's paperback, *Creative Dramatics in the Classroom*. For practice in voice and articulation, let the poets be your experts. Read aloud, stressing the final sounds of words to practice clearer articulation. Then, to work on voice, experiment with the effects of changes in volume, pitch, rate and pause.

Read a poem like Emily Dickinson's "After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes" and do it with all the wrong types of emphasis. Use loud volume, fast rate, high pitch and no pauses. It will be clear that every work has its own voice, and the voice can be found.

The "Echo for three voices" that introduces this article comes from the *Readers Theatre Handbook* (paperback) by Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White. They cover all genres, tell you how to adapt the short story and novel for RT and include scripts that will start you off immediately. I particularly like the adaptations of Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine* and a newspaper column— "Observer: The Person at Bay" by Russell Baker.

If the literature is worth reading, it can become Readers Theatre. Even difficult materials — materials obviously beyond the emotional and vocal range of your students — become possible as soon as the student realizes that all he need do is suggest character. That he can do.

So many voices can become a presence in your classroom. Invite them to come in. Create your own Readers Theatre.